

Hidden potential

Shale gas has the potential to contribute significantly to the EU's energy diversity, writes **Lambert Van Nistelrooij**

Undeniably, the question of extracting shale gas has been firmly lodged on Europe's agenda. And shale gas exploitation is a contentious issue. France announced a ban on shale gas drilling in October. Keenly aware of its gas dependency vis-à-vis Russia, Poland hopes shale-gas extraction may lessen this need. Similarly, the Dutch and British regard their significant shale gas reserves as a potential solution to compensate for their dwindling North Sea reserves. But how much do we really know about shale gas extraction?

Shale gas is currently extracted by means of hydraulic fracturing, called 'fracking'. The shale rock which contains the gas is blasted by large quantities of fresh water mixed with chemicals, such as methane. Many will have seen the YouTube video "Gasland" in which households set fire to water running from their tap, caused by the accidental release of methane used in shale gas extraction. Water supply contamination and even small earthquakes may also result because of fracking.

Some may be quick to point to such incidents, and jump to early conclusions. My MEP colleague Jo Leinen, has called on the commission to propose an "energy quality directive" that bans the exploitation of controversial fossil fuels, including shale gas. Such legislation could effectively ban research on the effects of harvesting shale gas, before we actually know what they are.

I disagree with this approach. How can you ban fracking if you cannot ascertain if it is harmful? Did the Dutch ban windmills after hearing Don Quixote ran into one? And even if we could conclude that the current methods of shale gas extraction are detrimental to our wellbeing and the environ-

ment, should we not be learning from our mistakes, and find ways to improve it?

I therefore approve of the European commission's recent decision to research the risks involving shale gas exploitation. The commission will also look at potential changes to the regulatory framework that may be necessary to make shale gas exploitation legally sound. This is exactly what I called for in a written question that I sent to the commission in May.

Make no mistake, I agree with Mr Leinen that we should be careful. My municipality in the Dutch province of North Brabant will also be subject to shale gas exploration – by all rights, I want safety to come first too.

But I also recognise that shale gas has potential. I have already alluded to some of its benefits. Shale gas may improve our energy security by reducing our gas dependency. It could also be a cleaner alternative in more coal-dependent member states. In countries that are phasing out nuclear energy, such as Germany and the UK, shale gas could contribute to keeping energy prices down by filling the gap. Lastly, shale gas research may inspire innovation that leads to cleaner and safer exploitation methods than 'fracking'. For example, multi-purpose drilling, which enables extraction of both shale gas and geothermic resources, could be one such technique. But shale gas research is still in an early phase and there may be many other unexplored opportunities ahead of us.

Never should we carelessly risk the land in which we live, nor the clean water we drink. Safety comes first. But neither should we dismiss shale gas exploitation out of hand – let us take well-informed decisions. Should it take longer to find more sustainable techniques, so be it. Shale gas exploitation may still help us a long way in meeting our energy goals. ★

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